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Farm Service Agency

The Conservation Reserve Program

Innovation in Environmental Improvement

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United States
Department of
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The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is the Federal Government's single largest environmental improvement program and one of its most productive and cost-efficient. It is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) through the Farm Service Agency (FSA).

Established in 1985, the CRP encourages farmers to voluntarily plant permanent areas of grass and trees on land that needs protection from erosion, to act as windbreaks, or in places where vegetation can improve water quality or provide food and habitat for wildlife. The farmers must enter into contracts with the CCC lasting between 10 and 15 years. In return, they receive annual rental payments, incentive payments for certain activities, and cost-share assistance to establish the protective vegetation.

Today, the CRP safeguards millions of acres of American topsoil from erosion; and by reducing water runoff and sedimentation, it protects groundwater and helps improve countless lakes, rivers, ponds and streams.

And now, with the "New CRP," launched in February 1997, FSA is working to maximize the program's environmental benefits. Only the most environmentally sensitive land, in relation to its cost, is now accepted into the program, making optimum use of each taxpayer dollar to improve the environment. Erosion control remains a top priority, and now water quality and wildlife habitat improvement are given greater emphasis than before.

Wildlife Benefits

The CRP ranks with America's most successful wildlife conservation efforts. The combined size of new wildlife habitats established by the CRP is twice as large as the National Wildlife Refuge System and all State-owned wildlife areas in the contiguous 48 States combined. The program encourages diverse covers of natural grasses and other plantings, with the specific aim of sheltering and feeding as great a variety of wildlife as possible.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has documented significant increases in wild populations due to the CRP, including those of many different bird species, big game such

as elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and pronghorn, and the reappearance of long-absent Prairie Chickens in Texas.



Tree Planting Benefits

Since 1986, CRP has helped farmers plant and maintain 2 million acres of trees.

Besides providing food and shelter for wildlife, CRP forests help cleanse runoff water of silt and pollutants, protecting and improving streams. They replenish water

tables, conserve and stabilize soil, reduce flooding, and enhance wildlife habitat. Trees also prevent the erosion of streambanks, increase oxygen levels and reduce so-called “greenhouse gases,” and clean pollutants from the air. They even moderate the weather by reducing evaporation rates and providing shade and buffers against winds.



Water Quality Benefits

Each acre under CRP contract reduces erosion by an average of 19 tons of top soil a year. This improves streams, lakes, and other bodies of water not only by reducing sediment, but also by preventing pollution from nutrients and pesticides carried by eroded topsoil.

On top of this, producers who enrolled acreage in CRP greatly reduced their application of pesticides and nutrients on these acres, largely eliminating CRP lands as a

source of agricultural pesticide and nutrient pollutants. Keeping these polluting chemicals out of water bodies decreases the risk of disease to desirable aquatic plants, animals, and humans.

The CRP encourages farmers to return wetlands now being farmed to their natural state. Wetlands provide important habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife — especially many threatened and endangered species. Wetland acreage also filters out pollution and sedimentation, improving water quality, and it serves as an important flood control mechanism. Healthy wetlands are vital to the recharging of underground aquifers.



Economic Benefits

The CRP's benefits go beyond improving the environment. The program also makes valuable contributions to America's economy.

CRP economic benefits include increases in farm income, timber resources, soil productivity, water and air quality, and small game. In fact, USDA economists have estimated that during the life of the 36.4-million-acre program, the CRP generates between \$15 billion and \$25 billion in income and savings to the economy.



To learn more about the Conservation Reserve Program, write to the following address:

**USDA FSA Public Affairs Staff
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
STOP 0506
Washington DC 20250-0506**

Information on FSA can also be found on the FSA's World Wide Web home page, at **www.fsa.usda.gov**



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PA-1608
August 1997